

Phoenix Rising

*Conquering the Stresses
of the Writer's Life*



Cate Russell-Cole

Phoenix Rising: Conquering the Stresses of the Writer's Life

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Introduction

I've worked with writers both as an autobiography teacher and as a mentor. In 2011 I began a blog project to equip, encourage and share resources with writers of all genres. This book contains the best of those articles.

Both online and offline, I often come across writers who are exhausted or discouraged. It saddens me when I hear stories of how they have left writing groups due to cliques and snobbery; had their work stolen; were unreasonably criticised; or have simply run out of ideas or energy. Being a writer can be a tough road of failures, rejection letters and time constraints. Independent Authors are pummelled with even more demands and pitfalls; as they grapple with technical issues, hackers and the whims of e-book distribution companies. It can be easy to question whether the time and effort is worth it. However, the pleasure, growth and discovery the writing life provides, makes the toughest challenges worth facing.

I chose the image and title of the phoenix rising from the ashes in response to the battles writers face. I personally relate to the need to choose to rise upwards: away from the fire and into a clear sky to start again. If your creative energy is low, your word count flagging or the downsides of being a writer are taking away your joy, I hope this book will give you new strength and hope with which to spread your wings and find new freedom.

Best wishes on your creative journey.

Cate Russell-Cole

Measuring the Value of Your Work in a Digital Age

Sometimes I look at the number of blogs, e-books and other authors out there and feel overwhelmed. I don't see it as competition, I see it more from the point of view that there are a finite number of readers and the market is flooded. That's on a bad day. On a good day, I think back over the number of books I can read in a week and how much I love curling up in bed with my iPad to read e-books and blog posts. Then the numbers simply mean there is more for me to choose from and enjoy!

Every creative person I know goes through these fluctuations in confidence. It stems from our own insecurities about whether we have the goods to 'make it' and become known, and/or from our tendency to compare ourselves unfavourably to others. That's a trait we need to get over!

Throughout history there have been debates over what makes creative works valuable or worthless. The criteria by which value is judged are often based on dated stereotypical ideas which state:

- It has to be one of a kind: not derivative, preferably a ground breaking new approach.
- It must be a crafted piece with an outstanding quality of pure excellence. (Really good reads count as nothing!)
- It can inspire future achievements and emulation by others.

That is a seriously stiff set of rules! The classical authors such as Charles Dickens may be able to live up to them, but they are not practical in the digital age. Plus it doesn't take into account that readers may like a particular style of story and will read more along those lines. Not everything has to shake the earth and be eligible for a prize in literature. It is the enjoyment of what you read that counts! We know this in our hearts, but still, we have those thoughts in our head and judge our work by them.

Whether you are a blogger, e-book writer, print published author or someone who just loves playing with words, the greatest determinant of the value you have as a writer, is the benefit writing gives you! There are two forms of creativity: private creativity for your own benefit, and public creativity. Public creativity is designed to be your showcase, whose value is determined by the outside world. If you choose private creativity, which is to create for your own enjoyment and growth, then by doing so, you have achieved your goal. Your work *is a success*, no matter what anyone else may think. If you choose public creativity, it's far more complicated.

If you interpret success as achieving payment or recognition of some sort, be aware that there are both benefits and risks in judging your success by outside acknowledgement. Research into creativity suggests that in many cases, working for money, accolades and another's vision, can dampen your creative spirit. Deadlines, clipped wings and fitting your ideas into formal constraints often impede the flow of ideas.

It is to your advantage to work out, at the beginning, who you are writing for. What are reasonable and unreasonable expectations? What is your own personal definition of success? Do critical responses really matter, positive or negative? If you know what you want, and how much feedback you are willing to absorb from others, you can save yourself discouragement and heartache later.

The process of becoming a successful author is a progressive one. Everyone starts with ideas and work that are just average. The challenge is to work towards improvement and better ideas. You also need to realise that the marketplace is always full of fads that come and go. Sometimes you may fit, at other times, you may not. Whatever is happening, never let go of the value your creativity has for you. The first person you have to please is your toughest critic: you. Don't allow numbers, fads and criticisers erode your self worth and enjoyment of what you do.



Healing Creative Injuries

Julia Cameron put a brilliant quote on Facebook which reads: *“When creative injuries are buried rather than acknowledged, they create potent creative blocks.”* I had never thought of writer’s block that way before.

Obviously injuries are caused by rejection letters, bad reviews, criticism by someone you care about, the joys of sharing the Internet with trolls... there are many ways. The question is how do you heal these injuries? Wounds don’t necessarily get better with time. Sometimes they just get worse.

In medicine, put simply, there are two general types of wounds: superficial and deep. Superficial is skin surface or a little deeper. There is a small injury which time will heal. The deep wounds are the ones that can go down, literally, to the bone. In an environment where there is no light, fresh air or positive outside influence, infections set in and serious complications occur. You get a temperature, feel pain and it doesn’t get better unless action is taken. Does that sound like you feel after being the victim of something nasty? Hot under the collar, hurt and left limping? So how do we heal these injuries so we can move forward?

- Recognise the offence has taken place.
- Talk it out with someone you can trust (not the one holding the sword), or journal it out. Say how you feel, why it was unfair etc. and get it out of your system.
- Let go of the infectious emotions you are holding onto: anger, bitterness, resentment, jealousy etc. See them as the destructive forces they are and move on. At this point, if you have journaled out your feelings, you may want to burn that as a ceremonial letting go.
- Move away from negative people or social media that are reinforcing your pain or adding additional hurts.
- Do something for yourself that will build your self-esteem back up. Join an initiative which is positive. Remember to laugh, play with your creative media and find the joy again.

I wish the answer came as simply as taking a painkiller and the problem is solved! As with any hurt, it is not an easy process. However, the more you practice shunning the negative and embracing the positive, the easier it gets. At times we all need some constructive criticism in our lives so we can grow, but never let it become poisonous. You’re worth more than that!



Creative Dark Matter: Clear Out What's Holding You Down

I've been an astronomy nut since I was a kid. I loosely follow what is going on and one theory has me scratching my head. Why are scientists so keen to identify what the dark patches in space consist of? You know, the bits where they can't see stars or comets or anything. I watch their impressive television programs about dark matter then I think, "why does anything have to be there? It's called space, right?" Perhaps it is similar to there is 'space in my closet?' Or 'Yes, I have some space in my schedule.' Why does it have to be full of something, anything? I realise even the empty space in my closet is scientifically full if oxygen and dust particles, but I am bemused that as human beings we have to fill every inch of available area with something. Is it so we feel safe? Do we have to be surrounded by what we're used to?

When our goals and resolutions to write have waned, we start to look at what we're not achieving and discouragement easily sets in. Did we bite off more than we can chew? Maybe part of the problem is, we still have the remnants of too many old meals around us? Maybe we are cluttering up our minds and workspaces with our own dark matter: things that aren't in the light (our conscious mind), but are lurking in the darker recesses, pulling us back by their energy. (Einstein believed that dark matter could be energy involving the properties of the expanding universe and... do you really want to know? It's very complicated!)

I have had issues with my own dark matter. I always had this compulsion to keep my old files on my computer: just in case... yes, to feel safe. Even with regular backups, it's so easy to lose things... I may need something from those minutes of that meeting five years ago, or that email or that old Internet bookmark... Right? Really? Do I also need that ten year out of date research file?

A close friend of mine puts it this way: "That's old energy." Old energy doesn't just rob us of gigabytes or space on desks, it also clutters up clear thinking. Looking back at old files that reminded me of old goals I grew past, wasn't helping me achieve what I want *now*. I needed a clean, simple new start. So I archived!

I went through my browser bookmarks, my address book, my computer files and the books on my desk. I cleared out everything that I am not using now. (Yes, being *me* it is all archived carefully, but it is out of my sight.) In effect, I got rid of the old energy and made space for the new. Then I looked at how much free space I have around me and I got excited about what it would be filled with!

I am so glad I took that step! I don't want to fill that space with 'dark matter' to feel safe, I want to wait to fill it when I grow. By giving myself the physical room to take new things into my life and letting go of the past, I mentally allowed myself to explore what new things I wanted to do. Plus past bad memories of rotten times are packaged away where they belong: as lessons from the past, not something to stumble over again and again!

For those of you who believe that a neat desk can be a sign of a sick mind, there is a faster option than a major clear out. Get some big packing boxes, throw your old stuff in them; then garage them or arrange them as a table or printer stand covered them with a tablecloth. Whatever works! Whichever way you do it, try reducing the anti-matter in your life and let more oxygen and dust particles dance freely. See what happens for you. It really does feel good!



Bomb Proofing Your Writers Ego

Way, way back in the olden days, when I was new to the Internet, I enrolled in a pilot writing course. I remember very little about it, but the basic idea was to take an animal you related to; find a god or goddess who represented that animal and then there were a few months of writing exercises. It was a great idea.

I love cats, so I went to the University library and read up on the Egyptian goddess Bast, or Bastet. Bast is the goddess who is half woman, half cat. She is the reason why cats were revered in Egypt. Now Bast had a war-like attitude when necessary, but overall, she was a lovely goddess. She was associated with protection, family and many a good party was held in her honour, with a lot of wine.

Now please remember, I was using the resources of a University library, not Wikipedia. Thus I presumed I got the correct facts. Some of these things aren't easy to track without much more extensive research than I was doing. In ancient history, gods came and went and meanings changed. Bast later became known as Ailuros in Greek mythology, so god (*excuse pun*) only knows what facts were right and wrong, but it all led to a rather nasty incident.

One of the texts referred to another lion-like goddess named Sekhmet. Sekhmet was introduced in that book as the negative alter ego of Bast. If you were on her right side, she was a doctor-blessing healer. Get on her wrong side and there would be nothing left of you for any doctor to try and heal! She had, shall we say, some anger management issues. (*Don't blame me, blame the archaeologists who piece all this together.*) Re-reading a little now, it appears they were two very closely related goddesses with a lot of similarities, so I got it at least, partly right!

I wrote my second assignment, which was to report on the research of your god/goddess and whoa did I cop some hate mail! I couldn't believe it. I reported the facts without judgement or any opinion, then I was fiercely attacked by multiple people and left stunned and amazed! I nearly would up in the Nile wearing concrete boots!

The issue was, even in 1997, Bast was still being worshipped. The fact that she could still have followers would never have occurred to me in a trillion years! It could still be the case today. There were temples devoted to her in the United States, where people were lighting green candles in her honour.

No, they weren't crazy. Some of the temple members were made up of intelligent people, with high powered careers that take above average IQ scores; hard work and a lot of common sense and ambition to achieve... including lawyers and they were now mad at me. Calling someone's goddess "the lady of pestilence" was apparently, a very bad move. Apologies were not being gracefully accepted.

The point of all this is, as a writer, you will *never* make everyone happy. It is a fact you just have to accept. Like you, I dread and fear negative book reviews, but I know, they will come. We often want others to accept us and love our work as much as we do. We don't cope well with being misunderstood, disliked and picked apart. When we have worked long and hard on a project, it hurts. One way to counteract that hurt is to try and accept, you just *cannot* make every reader

happy. Don't even try! Don't believe it is ever going to be possible. Not everyone will see things your way and some people, out of their own insecurities, cope by making themselves feel superior to someone else. Thus, welcome to the horror of the bad review, but please, *don't take it to heart*.

Honestly, it's 2012 and do you believe that a half cat, half woman can still make your life better? (*Good on you if you do, I have no problem with that.*) If you, personally, think that belief is wrong, it's not a big stretch to believe that bad feedback and negative reviews can simply be a wildly differing opinion too. They don't mean you are a lousy writer and it's time to give up! Reader's opinions are based on the way they choose to see the world and we're not all the same.

So hang in there and keep writing! Oh and the next time you light a green candle, remember that lovely cat lady and have a glass of wine in her honour.



Handling Criticism

One of the greatest problems creative people have is that really good ideas don't always receive the reception they deserve. You will always come up against the grouches who wouldn't do it *that way*, or think your ideas stink! Never mind the critics. They are thoroughly capable of being completely wrong! Do you think the authors of great novels were told any differently? Can you imagine what some people would have said to Suzanne Collins when she told them her idea for *The Hunger Games*?

Here are suggestions on handling criticism.

- Learn how to handle it, as some of it is useful.
- You can't see your blind spots or where you need to grow, others can and an honest and well-intentioned piece of criticism can be valuable.
- Stubbornness and being fiercely protective of your work can come from fear and low self esteem (self doubts). Work on overcoming this.
- All creative work is a constant process of learning. That process will involve mistakes, and sometimes others will pick up the mistakes you haven't noticed. It's up to you whether to see that as being good or bad.

I have had people publicly attack me online when encouraging other writers when they were dealing with criticism. My detractors were firmly stating that you shouldn't be a writer if you couldn't handle criticism. I ignored them. I can understand that if you came up through a competitive world, such as journalism, you have to be tougher than granite to survive. However, I thought they lacked compassion for their fellow wordsmiths. Just because someone isn't an emotional Rambo, doesn't mean they should abandon their gift of writing. That's just a waste!

Everyone starts at a place of insecurity: whether they later choose to remember that or not. What matters most is persistence, dedication and using what courage you can muster up, to continue to grow creatively. Too many people give up when discouragement and fear hit. Being able to move ahead despite threats or setbacks is the bravest move.



Take it in Small Steps: Don't Start a Revolution!

"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be."

Douglas Adams

When I studied psychology and counselling I learnt how to find out who you were and wanted to be, then to make changes in your life to get there. I discovered the common sense principles of being able to state what you wanted to change; assessing whether or not the physical and emotional resources were available; then enlisting support. It was all excellent food for thought, however, the *actual achievement* of success always seemed to be elusive. Something practical or emotional always got in the way, or I just didn't know how to move forward when I got stuck.

Reaching your goals and dreams by making small changes, or taking small progressive steps seems to work the best for most people. Trying to revolutionise our entire lives in one mammoth effort, risks leaving us tired and discouraged. Small changes are the ones that stick and are less likely to fizzle into failures and regrets.

The more practical authors of self-help books also advise us to change just one small facet of our lives at a time. If you change one small area successfully, they say, the rest will eventually follow. We all tend to overload ourselves with activity and then fall down in an exhausted, disgruntled heap. Instead, slow down, build your confidence and get the hang of what you need to do to progress. For example, if you're frantically busy, to reduce stress just take a fifteen minute break for yourself once or twice a week if that's all you can fit in. Use that time how *you* like. Trying to do everything helpful at once, such as exercise, give up smoking, change diet, change sleep pattern and breathe deeply on the hour every hour... will probably not happen long term. It's too much to get a handle on at once. Pick one; work on it until it becomes a good habit, then add another.

*"Wellness and Writing Connections," on Facebook, made a great point about looking making goals. To quote the page author, *"Writing a list of the things we would like to see more of in our life is a common theme in resolutions. What if we also make a list of things we want to leave out?"* What if your major goal was to resist things that pull you down emotionally? That can make a massive change to your quality of life. What if it is to gently pull back from a bad friendship and set yourself free from its poor influences? Sometimes knowing what you *don't want* is as important as knowing what you want.

This year, I have taken a new approach to new years resolutions. Instead of writing a list of goals, which I ultimately never get to fully achieve, I wrote a list of words which represented what I wanted out of my life. Life has a habit of taking us places we never thought we'd be and I would like to be more consciously open to that. I still know what I want to achieve, but I am going to take my own advice and take it in small steps and make small changes that are manageable chunks. Plus I will try not to fret if it goes pear shaped in places! Sometimes the unexpected path turns out to be the most exciting...

*<http://www.facebook.com/WellnessWriting>



Fat Free, Guilt Free Blogging Goals

In 2012 I discovered A Round of Words in 80 Days (ROW80). One thing we all have in common with our writing is life sure does get in the way! It's unavoidable and you just have to go with it. Even taking a day off to have fun can be necessary in our creative lives. The trick is, to do it without the guilt... and in people's update posts, I frequently read an awful lot of guilt!

ROW80 shares the same blogging philosophy I have. *"We are all different and we all have different demands on our time. Why should we all have the same goal? The simple answer is that we shouldn't. If you want to be a writer, then you have to be able to roll with the punches and adapt to your changing circumstances. If that means changing your goals when your life blows up, so be it. ROW80 is the challenge that champions the marriage of writing and real life."*

I like the emphasis on the goals being achievable. That is the secret ingredient to any goal. There must be flexibility and a sense of reality. However, despite how Kait Nolan has emphasised the easy-going nature of the challenge, I keep seeing writers listing masses of goals: far more than 80 days worth! NaNoWriMo is another example that concerns me in as far as mental and creative health are concerned. The word count allows for no days off for an entire month and a very high output. It's too short and writers stress, particularly when they hit plot problems and again, real life gets in the way. Why we are so insistent on deliberately placing ourselves under high-achievement related stress?

The happiest bloggers seem to be the ones who have three goals at the most. These goals aren't back-breaking and they have a balanced attitude which accepts that some days they may fail; some days they may come close; some days they will achieve above and beyond and that is all good. The strategy which brings a cheer from me, is seeing writers list the rewards they will give themselves on achieving their goals. A small treat, some 'me' time, a fun activity which refreshes and pulls them away from their desk. It's a great idea. I love it!

Earlier in this book I said that reaching your goals and dreams by making small changes, seems to work the best for most people. Trying to revolutionise our entire lives in one effort leaves us tired and discouraged. Small changes are the ones that stick. They are less likely to fizzle into failures and regrets. I feel like I need to say that again, with a great deal of feeling and much more emphasis.

Go easy and be kind to yourself!

Work, family, finances, holidays, sickness and the occasional crisis will always be there to keep you away from putting words on paper. Your success as a writer depends as much on how you deal with that, as it does on how much output you have. As a writer there is a massive laundry list of demands you are supposed to meet to succeed, plus I know how easy it is to get enthusiastically carried away with everything you want to achieve. However, please do take the time to step back, reassess your direction and see if you need to cut back on your goals to maximise your creative energy. It is not a sign of failure to do that, it's a sign of wisdom.



Escaping Mental Quicksand: Your "Time of Readiness"

Have you ever had a writing idea that just won't come together, or a goal you want to achieve but can't bring yourself to act on just yet? It could be a book you only manage to half write, an experimental change of genre in your writing or some opportunity which is outside your current experience. You may find yourself stalling. Or you may be frustrated when you start to work on that project, but it just seems to keep falling apart or halting, and you're not sure why.

Is it because it's just not your area? Do you have writer's block? Are you being lazy? Are you a failure? Is it fear holding you back? It could be some of those things, or it could be that all the resources you need are just not in place yet. Perhaps it is a waiting game that will get you there if you're patient.

There is a theory in psychology called the "time of readiness," which states that unless a child has reached a point in their physical development where they can try a new skill, such as crawling or walking, no amount of pushing or imposed practice will get them there. They just won't get it! There are some things in life you just can't rush. Any kind of growth takes it's own time.

I believe that the same principle works in a similar way in many areas of our lives as we continue to challenge ourselves to achieve in new areas. Personal growth is the key, whether that growth is of a mental, emotional, physical or spiritual nature.

We are often not able to make certain forward jumps until something clicks in our hearts and heads. Of course, the underlying problem may actually be writer's block generated by feeling unsure or fearful that is holding you back. Even so, perhaps there will soon be an optimum time where you can overcome that hurdle. Just as long as you aren't using fear as an excuse and you are actively working on trying to advance. Action is the key. If you're not working towards your goal in some way, then time of readiness is probably not the answer.

There are decisive actions you can take when you feel stuck at any stage so that you can move towards. Don't despair or get frustrated with yourself! Keep discovering new ideas, trying new skills and practicing what you need to master. Have a plan! Set clear goals and mix with people who can mentor you. Don't be afraid to experiment and get imperfect results at first. You need to build up to what you want in stages which will, annoying as it is, take time: the time you need to become ready.

It will come, you may just need to be patient. One day it can click into place.



Is Your Writing Life Stuck Under Your Mouse?

So what do you do when the Internet exposes you to too many new ideas, becomes too much hard work to keep up with and steals time from your creativity rather than adding to it? The answers to those questions have been keeping me pondering over the last six months. At the end of last year, I put down my blogging and social networking activities and worked out whether or not I personally felt they were worthwhile. My answer: it's a mixed one.

In the midst of my rest time, I was watching a documentary about the new digital era in which they gave an interesting balance to a few old clichéd questions. Is quick communication ruining concentration levels in our youth? Do we no longer learn things properly as we can just Google an answer? Is it all just shallow? As a creative person in both a traditional bookish and new 'geekish' way, I am very interested in the answers: but the answers that are right for me. They won't be the same for everyone.

Yes, our attention span is dwindling, so studies say. However, we now can access ideas and people and connect and change the world for good in ways we never could before. How we live is evolving. It is a new form of industrial revolution that will come with good and bad aspects. Using more clichés, it appears to me to be all things in moderation and it's how *you* use it.

For example, I have an ambivalent relationship with the almighty Twitter. I hate communicating in 140 characters. I hate so many people complaining that they have many subscribers but no one even comments on their posts. It smacks of us using each other and having lost our humanity! It can be seen as attention seeking, fame grabbing, faceless and badly aimed marketing. However, Twitter can also be seen as a quick way for busy people to look into what they would otherwise, never have the time to even consider. I find it alerts me to local news when I am in work mode and I have made a few real, valuable friendships through it. Maybe it is just not the perfect medium for me, but I can use it to reach and encourage people, so I will continue to do so... but on a limited basis.

I have found that making discerning choices about what to do and who to follow and not being afraid to cut things out of my feeds is probably the best choice for conserving and feeding my creative energy. I run a creatively based business. In the same way getting buried under piles of accounting, red tape and paper work zaps my work and idea generating time, so does keeping up with the digital fads.

So be brave. Have a good look at a variety of interesting web sites, social networkers and other Internet goodies and see what you like. Try them for awhile, then cull what is too much, doesn't feed you or just drags you into a negative mindset. People take me off their Twitter feeds all the time. I see my stats run all over the place. I have learnt to let it not bully me into staying connected where I don't need to be.

Someone suggested that one day a week you should have a 'Digital Sabbath' and stay away from anything computerised and mobile phone orientated. I think it is a great idea. It is the same old argument we had with television. There comes a time when you have to switch off it's mesmerising force and go out and actually DO something active. Go pick up your pen, instrument, paintbrush or craft project. Switching off and balancing, may save your creative soul.



Balancing the Blogging Load

Perhaps it's part of being an autobiography teacher, but I love reading blogs. I enjoy them as they are real: you can sense it when someone is genuinely sharing with you. The only thing that bothers me is how often I hear how burnt out bloggers feel. It worries me when I keep coming across post after post where bloggers are expressing how wrung dry of inspiration and physically exhausted they are. I read in profiles how bloggers work all day, come home and deal with family needs, then write until insane o'clock, as that is the only writing time they have. From an outsider's point of view, it leaves little mystery as to why writer's block so often sets in. It's fuelled by overwhelm and fatigue.

It would be very easy for me to step into strict writing teacher mode and command "blog less often!" The issue is, if you've done your homework on how to blog, to satisfy the search engine rankings and build an audience, it is recommended you blog daily. If you don't, there are dire predictions of failure and doom. It comes down to the settings of the search engine ranking robots: which care as much about the needs of flesh and blood humans beings as say, your toaster does. Recently one blogging Twitter feed, which I normally enjoy, started preaching down this path. Such was their fervour, that you had to work yourself into the ground to succeed, I un-followed them. The last thing anyone needs is the whip being cracked in an already 'too-busy' society.

So that leaves bloggers with a choice: Buy into "toaster mentality" and let your life be ruled by search engine logic and cyber peer pressure; or take care of yourself by posting less and taking the pressure off. I opt for the latter, but not just for myself, also because as a reader, I know I simply cannot keep up with every post that comes out that I really want to absorb and comment on. We are potentially overwhelming the supporters we want and need. Could that be why so many blogs have such low subscription and comment numbers?

What you do as a blogger is entirely up to you. Just as long as it's right for you! From everything I have studied about writing, to write daily is a necessity for writers who are truly serious. May I suggest, that perhaps, as an alternative to blogging every day, keep a journal, or use some of your would-be posts as writing practice? There is a great sense of satisfaction to be had from just writing for YOU, experimenting and having fun for your eyes only. It is all about breaking away from the "toaster mentality" and doing what your creative heart is telling you to do.

If you write less often, it also means you are under less pressure to put forward a polished piece of work which ultimately becomes part of your writing portfolio. Write when you have something you really want to say and share. Plus be careful about how personal your posts are... When you are online, it is dangerously easy to forget just how open your most personal information and feelings are to anyone who finds you.

The bottom line is, take good care of yourself. If you look after yourself and allow yourself time and space to be open to new input, ideas will generate much more easily and you can recapture your enthusiasm. There are more ways of becoming a recognised blogger than merely relying on search engine rankings and appearing in Twitter feeds en masse. If you would like support, use the #mywana tag on Twitter started by @KristenLambTX who supports bloggers. There are also blogging community web sites out there that may be helpful. Just beware of the toasters...



Writers and Depression: Debunking the Stereotypes

It's widely recognised that writing out your feelings and experiences is good for both your mental and physical health, yet I am only just beginning to see a number of resources online that encourage the use of writing and creativity as a tool in combatting depression. I know from my own experience that writing assists me in forming a new perspective on what actually happened. I can sort emotions from facts and decide how to move forward. I'm encouraged to hear that any form of writing and creativity is an activity which can help to put the black dog on a leash. Please note I said help. Writing is not a substitute for essential counselling or medical treatment, or in itself a cure. It's a tool that can help.

Historically, it's been repeatedly claimed that writers and artists are statistically more prone to bouts of depression, mental illness and anxiety. Is that because we are the masters of dark arts that explore the uncontrollable miseries of life? Or is that simply because writers and artists get their negativity out on paper or canvas for the world to see? Technically, it is unlikely that the rates of depression in creative people are higher. It's just that the output makes their suffering obvious.

Not everyone who goes through depression will develop long-term debilitating problems. After surviving serious psychological stresses and traumas, a majority of people experience post traumatic growth. It doesn't happen quickly, but the process of working through grief and trauma can have benefits that will positively colour the rest of your life.

Researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) were among the first to research post traumatic growth. While at first people may show high stress signs and be depressed or overwhelmed by what they have been through, in time they can grow to come through with:

- "Increased perception of competence and self-reliance.
- Enhanced acceptance of one's vulnerability and negative emotional experiences.
- Improved relationships with significant others.
- Increased compassion and empathy for others.
- Greater efforts directed at improving relationships.
- Increased appreciation of own existence.
- Greater appreciation for life.
- Positive changes in one's priorities.
- Stronger religious/spiritual beliefs.
- Greater personal intimacy with God.
- Greater sense of control and security through belief in God.
- Greater meaning about life and suffering through religion."

In that alone, there is hope! Tapping into your creative work can be a vehicle that pulls you towards that growth. Depression is our reaction to feeling helpless. It is a type of forced surrender. Investing time in your writing is an action that pulls you out of the position of helplessness. You are doing something: creating, thinking, growing and empowering yourself!

If you are feeling depressed, don't try a quick fix or avoid dealing with your misery! To bust another myth, getting treatment for depression will not, as some believe, rob you of your creative drive. The more clearly you can think, the better your work will be. You will be able to tap into your true self, rather than be robbed by only seeing life through negative eyes. If you've been down for

some time, find a friend or professional who will understand and knows how to deal with depression in an effective way. Don't stop looking until you find the support you need!



Writers Should Be Bathed In Blue: Boosting Productivity

I love design and the impact it has on people's psyche. A few years ago, I took a basic interior design course just for the fun of it. I learnt that without pleasing colours and visual balance, rooms run the risk of becoming abandoned dust bunny habitats. So what's that got to do with writing? Essentially, every writer needs a writing space that isn't a deterrent to working, or your writing life can become a dust bunny habitat too! If you put the time into organising an energising writing area, your writing output will most likely increase. My own experience stands as a sad testimony to this.

For a long time I used my environment as an excuse not to write. I wasn't comfortable. My desk lives in a corner of a room that is dark, noisy and cramped. I was always putting off writing as I just couldn't think there. I'd do anything to avoid the area and not write. But I needed that space. My books, records and equipment were all there. I had to find an answer that would prompt me to create.

When I teach creativity, one of the exercises we do is: picture yourself in an empty white room. Now, if you were to create your ideal writing space, what would you fill it with? What colour would you paint it? What do you need in there you can't work happily without? Answers generally vary between a simple, uncluttered desk; to paradises with garden vistas, fireplaces and antique writing desks. Oh, if only! I then go home from my inspirational class, to my five feet square desk and cupboard. So realistically, for me at least, what was the point of that exercise?

Even if I can't create paradise, identifying what I want makes me think. If I want a garden view, I can add a few plants and a floral picture or calendar. I know I need my books around me, as my ideal room had floor to ceiling bookcases. A log fire is a no go, but I can make sure I have appropriate lighting, a fan for summer and a heater for winter. I don't need to renovate, I just need to tune into what I need.

The other essential element is colour. For anyone creative, you know the power this has to make you feel great, or feel blah. We once stayed in an ultra modern hotel that was all black, brown and grey surfaces. I have never felt so cold anywhere. The stone and concrete depressed me. I feel the same way about writing on a piece of white paper with a blue or black pen. It is cold. It doesn't inspire me.

Colours have been scientifically found to affect your blood pressure and neurological functions. If they affect your body so profoundly, no wonder they greatly impact your mood! Blue is supposed to be the best colour for creative people to be surrounded by. Red encourages risk-taking behaviour; green soothes and so on. Statistically, people have more fights in yellow rooms. However, if you are writing a crime novel, maybe yellow would be a productive colour to surround yourself with? It could put you in the right frame of mind! It's up to you to discover what works for you as an individual. If you see yellow as positive, sunny and cheerful, which is the atmosphere you want, it may be your perfect choice rather than blue. If you can't paint the room your desired colour, buy a yellow print, have yellow flowers in a vase, get yellow stationary items. Any way you can introduce it, bring it in to heighten your mood and your enjoyment of your work area.

If you really want to write, you will find a way. If you're blocked or not so confident as a writer, you can find any excuse not to be productive. It comes down to your dedication to your goals. But,

as with every area of life, if you take the time to care for your needs and improve what you have, it will pay off for you.



Which Wins? Creative Pleasure Or Word Count?

“What percentage of your time should you spend thinking about writing, as opposed to the percentage of time you should spend building your word count?” What’s your opinion on this question as a writer? Which should be greater: writing or planning? Or is this a chicken and the egg question?

Thinking, day dreaming, reading others’ work and mentally planning are critical parts of the creative process, yet we don’t necessarily count them as productive time. Too often we let activity, goals, self-imposed deadlines and social media “shoulds” hijack our creative lives. Then our joy in writing drains away and we wonder why.

Solitude has always been a necessary part of many writers' routines. My first introduction to the writing life came from reading “Little Women” as a child. *“Her `scribbling suit’ consisted of a black woollen pinafore on which she could wipe her pen at will, and a cap of the same material, adorned with a cheerful red bow, into which she bundled her hair when the decks were cleared for action. This cap was a beacon to the inquiring eyes of her family, who during these periods kept their distance, merely popping in their heads semi- occasionally to ask, with interest, “Does genius burn, Jo?”*

To be honest, I don’t welcome those sort of interruptions. When I am writing, studying or reading, I need to be left alone. Having to stop and start a train of thought irritates me. The image of a writer slaving away alone in the attic is much more me. At times, I just need to sit still and think. I am not writing, planning blog posts, Twitter promos, worrying about e-book sagas or any of that. I just need to be. That is when I get back in touch with my true creative self and from that I can produce good work. Staring at the to-do list merely robs me.

If you read the work of creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, you will discover that being alone and being able to get away from the outside world and inside yourself, produces a state of focus and concentration that induces creative flow. We need that flow. It takes the drudge work out of the process and breathes enthusiasm into us. Mihaly talks about a state of ecstasy which we can gain from creativity. To gain that, we must spend some time alone.

Getting away from it all is not a new concept. Many world religions encourage pilgrimages and have legendary tales about going into the wilderness to grapple with their issues; then coming out refreshed, inspired and with far more to offer those around them than when they went in.

While setting word goals can be important, never underestimate the power of being inside your own mind, building your characters and experiencing your story as if you were a part of it. Fantasy, asking “what if” questions and playing with ideas are integral to the writing process.

While we need writers communities and initiatives for encouragement; plus the time to promote ourselves through social media; every so often it’s good to be reminded that we don’t have to be constantly in each other’s faces or typing, typing, typing to be achieving! So occasionally, unplug the Internet, get away from all temptations and sit, walk or run away to be by yourself for awhile. Your writing will be far better for it.



Petwriification: A Health Warning for All Writers

“This is an urgent public health warning for all writers. Over the last decade, we have witnessed the alarming spread of a highly contagious disease which corrodes motivation, word count, editing, effective marketing and creative quality of life. This condition is known as petwriification.

Petwriification / Petwriified (*verb*) *pet-wri-fi-cation*

A psychological condition affecting writers, characterised by sudden horror, cognitive paralysis or emotional outbursts. It occurs when:

- (1) finding a mistake in previously published work;
- (2) discovering a phrase or point of grammar used wrongly for years;
- (3) suddenly becoming immobilised on a punctuation issue;
- (4) receiving negative feedback or poor reviews; and
- (5) when writers have compared themselves to other writers, concluding that they are comparatively deficient. (*Derived from the common word petrify and the Latin petra, meaning rock.*)”

We’ve all been there, right? Point two in the definition knocked me out for a time. I was questioning my ability to coach writers and author books when I *wasn’t up to standard*. It turned out that it was a difference in understanding of a phrase in common use between the United States and the British colonies. Some would say I was wrong, some say I am right. It still didn’t help my confidence. Had I placed it in this book, you’d be raising an eyebrow at me! I don’t want to be corrected in the reviews. I hate looking like a fool! You don’t miraculously know everything the instant you become a writer. I don’t want to know about that though. I want to be perfect to feel safe. Safety isn’t part of the business of writing.

The creative process is one of growth: you start by making many mistakes and being influenced by all kinds of sources, then you mature. With maturity comes better quality of work; the realisation that not every piece of advice is right; accepting that there will always be negative responses; and that mistakes are essential. They are what help us to master the written word.

As we gain confidence in ourselves, we become less and less petwriified. That enables us to take on challenges we once would have rejected as too daunting. To gain the upper hand against petwriification, we need to develop a strong mental immune system. You can do this by practicing your craft, staying away from the terminally judgemental, studying and being open to correction. Plus, be open to the fact that the ‘experts’ aren’t always right.

The more e-books I read from the major publishing houses, the more obvious and unacceptable mistakes I find. Are standards lowered, or are they changing? Fashions and fads come and go. I was taught to never use a dash, always a semi-colon and you NEVER put a comma before the word ‘and.’ People *would* shout at you. Those were the standards when I was working for a University and in my editing course. Now am I right and you’re wrong? Well, only if you would have written that sentence as “your wrong.” We have to accept that not everything in writing is standardised Internationally and we can’t let it get us down. Standards even differ between local Universities. You can’t go nuts trying to stay on the good side of everyone.

We need to place value on our ideas and our achievements. We will always have days when we wonder if we really know what we’re doing. Self-doubt is a part of the human condition. Those

doubts will not win with me though. I am determined! I love writing and I'm here to stay. If you think I am wrong I will listen. I reserve the right to disagree and thanks for trying to help. Perfect or not, I will work as hard as I have to, in order to keep maturing as a writer. I want to prove I have what it takes to be an awesome writer!



About the Author

Cate Russell-Cole is a qualified Creativity Coach and Social Worker. She has a love of the science fiction - fantasy genre and has been writing diaries, appalling poetry and short stories since she was a child. Cate lives in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and two cats and habitually writes everything in Australian English.

Over her career, she has researched, written and taught five creativity-orientated courses; worked as a freelance writer, graphic designer, desktop publisher and has authored ten non-fiction books. Privately, she is a Christian science fiction/ fantasy author who is working on The Chronicles of Mirchar Series, plus a non-fiction study guide on the life of King David.

Publications by Cate Russell-Cole

- Write Your Life Story E-Course
- Unleashing Your Creative Spirit
- Prayer Journal Workshop
- Creating and Resolving Conflict in Fiction (Four Dimensional Characterisation Series)
- Building Emotionally Realistic Characters (Four Dimensional Characterisation Series)
- Phoenix Rising: Conquering the Stresses of the Writer's Life
- Phoenix Thriving: Conquering Stress and Burnout in the Blogging Life
- Savvy Blogging for Time Starved Writers
- Avoiding Back Pain: A Simple Guide
- Maintaining Your Independence, A Course For Seniors
- Person To Person: A Layman's Course in Communication Skills
- The Chronicles of Mirchar: The Dragon Tree
- The Chronicles of Mirchar: The Memory Library
- The King David Study Guide